



"ARTIFICIAL METABOLISM"

AN
INTERVIEW
WITH

NAM JUNE PAIK

by
Willoughby Sharp

Willoughby Sharp: I wanted to start off by saying that a lot of people identify you with a kind of popular image, the "George Washington of Video." What does that mean to you?

Nam June Paik: A slant-eyed George Washington.

WS: Really. What do you think they think about... the father of a country? What are you the father of?

NJP: I am kind of an old man.

WS: You're 50, aren't you?

Shigeo Kubota: No, 49.

WS: When will you be 50?

SK: July 20th, same day as Jackie Kennedy and same day as the moon landing.

NJP: Also Marshall McLuhan was born on that day.

WS: What is your background?

NJP: I was born in Korea, in 1932. My English isn't very good. John Cage said I better publish my book before it improves. (Laughs)

WS: You've made a career out of your bad English.

Ok, so how do you give the reader a quick passage from 1932, in Seoul, Korea, to 1982, almost 50 years, to Mercer Street, in New York City? What are the highlights of that? Is there any part of that you want to share?

NJP: One New York image that I will never forget is during wartime in Korea, WWII, you see. The Japanese propaganda magazine said that the reason America will capitulate soon is because of the energy crisis. The reason is that Ameri-

cans are so spoiled. The Japanese, who had no energy at all, could live in inconvenience and were strong, but for Americans, who had such a good material life, any energy disruption would be fatal. For instance, when no elevator comes in the Empire State Building it is fatal, whereas in Japan, with only a few floors, you can live without an elevator. It's the same as Mao Tse Tung's idea, actually.

WS: What idea is that?

NJP: Low technology.

WS: Be more specific?

NJP: The Peoples Army will engulf high technology. When you have no technology at all, then you can survive longer. Anyway, that is not the point—this magazine wrote, and I read it in '42, when I was just awakening, with the Seoul spring, this magazine said, everything is so well heated in America, that American models wear just a fur coat and one layer of clothing, so that, when they go out, they just put on the fur coat.

WS: That's what the people in Seoul thought about people in New York City?

NJP: Yeah, well I read it, and I said, "Well, if that's all they're wearing, [what a romantic image], then I have to go there."

WS: Paik, in what way is video revolutionary?

NJP: The problem is that the concept of revolution came from mainly the French and Marxist models.

WS: Which are characterized by?

NJP: Steam locomotive technology.

WS: Oh?

NJP: Marx never telephoned Engels. Understand? And then up to Adorno and Marcuse, it was generally a reinterpretation of Marx, and Marx was basically French Revolution and English Industrial Revolution. He wanted an equitable redistribution of profit, which was created by steam engine. One of the conditions at that time was that the Western world had a monopoly on technology. The whole world was very primitive then. There was no competition with the Western world, so Western world had a technology monopoly, kind of low grade technology, yet it had a monopoly, and then, energy was quite cheap because most of Western peoples were slave labor, even French workers. Those were the conditions. All those conditions changed. Western countries no longer have monopoly of technology and people are well paid, and their basic needs are satisfied. There is nothing more to buy, practically speaking. In Marx, there were two elements—we are not equal, that's one; and the other is that the lower class has nothing to eat or wear. The lower people suffer from substandard living. And then there is absolute poverty. Now, absolute poverty has been eliminated. Even with food stamps you live better than workers in other countries. What remains is relative poverty. Still, there is a great difference of wealth and dignity. Someone can jet to Florida every week and...

WS: Some people can't get a subway token.

NJP: ... not only that, they have to watch the tv commercial of the jets flying away everyday. Relative comparative scale is bigger, as the absolute scale is better.

WS: Be more specific.

NJP: If I were a welfare mother, still I can feed myself and have hot water. Yet, I have much less pride than French workers in 18th century who worked and produced their own livelihood.

WS: The gap between the poor and the rich is getting larger.

NJP: Yeah, and so, the machine is replacing labor and whatever labor pool is left is the big Third World labor pool. The problem is that since we have everything, practically, less and less things are needed. The only technology that grows is like video game technology, which nobody needs, because everybody has an icebox. We cannot increase our need in material level, it can be only intellectual or spiritual level.

I read in the financial section of the *London Times*, by an economic professor, he said by the end of this century only 3% of people will work, and they will satisfy most of our basic needs. So, problem is, what does the 97% do? I gave this question: "What do you think? If you are 40 people, and only one of you has a job, and he can make you all happy, because he will give you clothes and car and food, then what will the other 39 people do?" I asked this question at the Ecole Supérieure in Paris, and one guy stood up and said: "The 39 people will criticize what the one guy is doing." I just burst into laughter! Only in France. But he had a truth.

Now, my robot... generally people say that robots are created to decrease people's work... but my robot is there to increase the work for people because we need five people to make it move for ten minutes, you see. Ha ha.

The robot is not replacing five other people's work; it increases the work for five people. So, information is not anymore a means to convey something. Information becomes the substance of consumption. When you think, what is our basic need: food, eating—that is very easily satisfied. The physical limit is reached very fast. Dress—your basic needs are very easily satisfied, even Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. And then...

WS: What about sex? That's more than work.



NJP: That has a physical limit.

WS: That's very easily satisfied if you're fed and clothed. (Laughs.)

NJP: But still there is a certain limit. Fourth is alcohol. Alcohol, even drugs, have physical limits. But only in gambling and in information is there absolutely no limit. Information needs are limitless.

When I went to college, there was no Xerox machine, eh? I didn't feel too inconvenienced not having one. But, now, in the current generation, going to college means shuttling between Xerox machines. That's all they do.

WS: And computers.

NJP: Same thing. Also, until you come to New York you don't really need that big Sunday New York Times Magazine, but once you're hooked onto it, then when you go to Los Angeles, the first thing you miss is it. A guy I met, he said since his mother and father didn't buy *Playboy* magazine, the first time that he felt sex was in the New York Times Magazine.

WS: Those women that were naked under those coats in the Sunday Times Magazine section.

NJP: Of course.

WS: What do you want to say next?

NJP: How does information breed information? I call this "artificial metabolism," like an artificial intelligence. In a classical metabolism you eat and digest and move and procreate and shit out. That is the limit. That is easily satisfied. In artificial metabolism, which people are developing, like a secondary metabolism, there is no limit to consumption. The only way to come out of recession is for secondary metabolism to be increased.

WS: What do you mean?

PAIK'S FAMILY IN 1931

NJP: The information business, you know. So, my contribution, or a video artist's contribution is that we did create substantial software, which has been neglected by main-line programmers. We also create a market: not all intellectual people's energy got wasted for terrorism.

WS: Our use, in the early '70's, of the 3400 Sony port-a-pac helped establish it as an educational tool.

NJP: Of course. I keep saying that to Sony. (Laughs) Also, it helped get your back in shape because it was so heavy.

WS: If Sony paid us \$30 an hour for all the work we did with that machine, they'd still be getting a bargain.

NJP: Of course.

WS: When I was taking my Sony port-a-pac around to colleges and universities in '73 I thought it was just normal; but when I look back now, I realize there was no one doing it. In the early '70s, most of the colleges and universities didn't even have any video equipment.

NJP: When I was in Stoneybrook, when I was attached to the Educational Resource Center to try and develop new technology in 1968, they were completely into million dollar machines. They just laughed at my little Sony. When I brought the first portable AV 5000 color Sony machine everybody at WGBH-TV, Boston, everybody said, "Oh, that's junk!" I mean, that's engineering tops saying that!

So anyway, we must talk about developing artificial metabolism—that is the only way to create new jobs for young people.

WS: What does that mean?

NJP: That is creating spiritual and intellectual need, through information. You see, when you have a good toilet, good wife, good food to eat—there is no expansion. You got it all.

We should talk about example first, instead of principle, when you are too new. There is that great young Fluxus artist, Tomas Schmit, and I visited him in Berlin.

WS: What year?

NJP: Oh, about '66. He lived in a third or fourth floor walk up, which has only cold water running in one room, and then, if he go to bathroom, he go all the way down to use common bathroom in the courtyard.

Anyway, what I'm saying is that material wealth is relative, you know, but, even in America, and even in the bad buildings in Harlem you still at least have hot running water—yet, they don't feel good. Whereas, Tomas Schmit, young poet, doesn't mind climbing down five floors.

Another way of saying what artificial metabolism is all about is that, in Japan, they have highest quota of video cassette recorders, ok, but in Tokyo maybe one third of the buildings have no indoor plumbing. So then many people who have no indoor plumbing have a brand new cassette recorder.

They have a very good pick up service of the shit. So this artificial metabolism against natural metabolism is a very fine game. They are quickly skipping all those material improvements to go to information.

WS: Okay, I'm going to give you an example of something that interests me and you can tell me if it has any relevance to what you're saying. After Intel developed the first microprocessor—a computer on a chip—the 4004, soon Texas Instruments jumped into the game and announced that it would "leapfrog" the industry with the 64K chip. After spending tens of millions of dollars building a plant in Arizona to get the perfect, "clean" environment necessary for mass production, it shocked the industry, closed the plant, and announced that it could not produce 64K chips profitably. However, just recently, T.I. said they were resuming production from their Japanese plant. You see, only the Japanese seem to have the craft and the meticulousness to be able to accomplish producing these new technologies.

NJP: Sometimes being small is very convenient. I mean simply that when you make microchips, delicacy is the most important. Energy is not the issue. The finger must be very thin. Physically speaking, the thinness of the finger is important. When I saw them making the vidicon for color camera, it was 15 to 18 year-old girls doing it, with the best vision. They said they have almost zero dust level. I was impressed.

WS: One of the things that impresses me about you is that you have a rare ability to combine both... you're a very wise person, on a very interesting level. You look and see. And absorb, and make very acute judgments. You have done so much in this country, and yet you were born in Seoul. One of the reasons that you are unique is because you have this combination Eastern and Western synthesized vi-

"MARX NEVER TELEPHONED ENGELS"

Half of America's Power is Black (because)

sion. You have been critical of your own society, and you have read Marx, Engels, and all the other guys, and you think a lot, and you read the *New York Times* daily. . . . (Everybody laughs.)

NJP: I read *New York Post*. "Page Six" is my favorite. Yes, I think I ought to be editor of "Page Six." I can do a good job.

WS: What do you want to actually do? When you're dead, right, and I say "I saw Paik around a lot and he was in my *Luminism Show* of 1967, and he did this that, consultant to the Rockefeller Foundation on video and I missed his performance at the Kitchen, and everyone thought he was a pretty good guy?" What am I going to think about? What do you want to leave? What's the difference in the world going to be that you were alive?

NJP: I think my job is to leave a book on Chinese history which I will be writing immediately after the Whitney Show. I have finished half, and I gave this to a German publisher and they are almost likely going to print it. I have been reading a Chinese history book for twenty years called *Saum* by Chen. Professor Burton Watson of Columbia University published a partial translation in the '60s. It's "Idea for Idea"—I printed this in the *Fluxus Newspaper* in 1964. The fetishism of idea, you know, which is a basic thing in this century, well, in this post WWII generation, and, in this sense, most Americans are more advanced evolutionarily. Somehow, Americans are more . . . cerebral, more brainy. And very cool. The reason John Cage got loved so in Europe is because he is a real American—no emotion. I was taking a plane trip from Calcutta to Cairo, and I saw that only one reading lamp was on, and I saw that a girl, a young girl who looked American, was reading some kind of paperback. I still remember that image. Everybody was so tired from flying that they were all trying to sleep. It was the old days, '56 I think, with prop jets. It took a long time. I thought this girl is really an artificial human. She's not tired at all. And reading, most likely science fiction, at midnight, alone. I thought this was really an artificial human. A girl who is made only from brains and nothing else is born. The psychological impact of this is, for me, very strong, and I was very proud that I printed the words "fetishism of the idea" in *Fluxus* magazine in 1964. These days I often meet young computerists, and I imagine they bleed monthly, not in liquid, but in tape.

WS: But, what do you mean to say with this woman reading this book on the plane?

NJP: This is artificial metabolism.

WS: I see. (But still not really understanding.)

NJP: One artistic revelation—enlightenment—for me was just artistically tied his *Hommage à New York*, in the early '60s, before I came. He did it at the Museum of Modern Art, and then John Cage wrote me—I was in Europe, had never been in this part of the continent—and he said, "I enjoyed this *Hommage à New York* by Tinguely very much, but it still had one common European failure, which is it had only one center."

WS: Center?

JP: Yes. The whole aesthetic had one

center, whereas John Cage's music had many centers.

WS: What did he mean?

NJP: One zero point, one focal point. I clearly remember (although I lost the letter) he said that he enjoyed the show very much. He was very complimentary. However, he said it had this "one-centeredness." When Stockhausen made his first trip to America what impressed him was no center, just space. He wrote his orchestra piece "Carre" on the airplane flying over Texas and Los Angeles. Over this enormous plain. This is very American. The lack of a center is very important.



WS: So Stockhausen has a lack of a center?

NJP: No. He tried in that piece, "Carre," to make that vast space—spaced-out—aesthetic. And, of course, Jasper Johns' canvases share that quality, even the small ones have no center. Yes. And Pollock. And Merce Cunningham. . . .

WS: I have to interrupt. I want to know some specifics. When did you have the show with the television sets in Wuppertal?

NJP: '63.

WS: Okay. Say something about that. You are credited with introducing "video art" in that show. You had a couple of television sets. . . . I didn't see the show. . . . which you did I don't know what with. Why was that show in Wuppertal important as far as the video revolution goes? What did

you do?

NJP: Well, I had a performance career, which was actually very successful, and I thought that I would make a change and include visual materials since that was there anyway. . . .

WS: So you were extending your performance? Was there a sense of selling the work?

NJP: Yes, of course, I even printed that. What I printed in *de Collage* magazine is what Arthur Miller said in *Death of a Salesman*: "In capitalist society the only thing which I possess is that which I can sell." So, of course, I knew that by the

Photo Credit: Peter Moore 1965

NJP: I think very cheap, 50 DM each.

WS: Was that 13 pieces or one piece?

NJP: Separate.

WS: What did you do to each of the television sets?

NJP: One I did horizontal modulation. . . .

WS: Yeah.

NJP: Then to another, vertical modulation. . . .

WS: Then you tried to understand what was happening electronically in the television set?

NJP: Yes, I had an engineer's help, and I even paid him. Pretty hard time. Not only you live without earning a living, but you bought all these tv sets plus paying the engineer, so it was hard.

WS: There is something very important here, that I think very few people understand at all. I just understand it now, and it seems, to me, to be one of the major parts of your, or Bell's, or Edison's or Tesla's, or Armstrong's, or any inventor's work, that there is the *actual manipulation of the electromagnetic spectrum or the use of it as material that is innovative.*

NJP: Yes.

WS: Now most people that think of you, think of a person who made the best selling video tape, *Global Groove*; but what analysis has been brought to your work? What you're telling me is that you actually took a found object, a television set, and did more than present it as a given object, which it sort of looks like, right? . . .

NJP: Mmmhmm.

WS: You got into the very mechanism of the tool itself and tried to deal with it and then tried to demonstrate thirteen different aspects of its character.

NJP: Yeah.

WS: Now, where is that said? Does anyone understand that there is something in your art called invention? (And is about to say "prepared," when. . .)

NJP: Yeah. When John Cage was a student of Schoenberg, you know, formally studying, he said to Cage: "You are not a great composer, but you are a great inventor."

WS: Do you identify with a tradition of electromagnetic contributions from Faraday, Maxwell, and Hertz?

NJP: Yeah, of course.

WS: . . . And Marconi and Tesla?

NJP: Of course, Marconi is very important.

WS: Do you know that Marconi started his own company when he was in his twenties, and he raised all this money around one vision—communicating human intelligence over the spectrum? He was going to send an electromagnetic wireless radio signal across the Atlantic Ocean. Everyone thought it would shoot off the face of the earth because of the curvature. They didn't know anything

time I was a little known. . . . Many of my friends, like Mack and Piane, were relatively well known, and financially well off, whereas I was completely dependent on my family's monthly pay check. In Germany, in seven years, I made 150 DM in the theater. (Everybody laughs.) If you are over 30, you are supposed to make some money. If all my friends were doing okay, so should I. (Laughing.) It didn't sell for a long time.

WS: You showed 13 TV sets?

NJP: Yes.

WS: Where'd you get the TV sets?

NJP: I bought them. I bought one from my landlord, and then I bought twelve from one source—a guy who was exporting used tv's to Holland.

WS: So what did you pay for them?

"Information Needs Are Limitless"

